

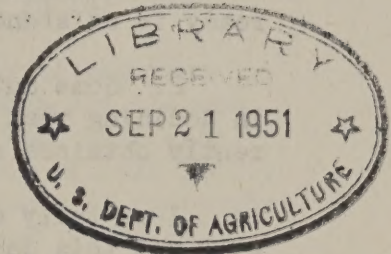
HOW GOOD A JOB ARE WE DOING IN REPORTING
AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH TO THE PEOPLE?

Before

American Association of Agricultural
College Editors
Urbana, Illinois
July 16, 1951

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May I open this discussion by quoting from the report of the Study Group of the Pace Sub-Committee of the House Agricultural Committee which was appointed to make a study of and recommendations on the agricultural research activities of the United States Department of Agriculture and the various states.

Under the subheading "Credit for Research Achievement" we find:

"The study group found no evidence to contradict the statement that agricultural research often gets little or no credit for its many significant achievements, to say nothing of its less spectacular accomplishments. This is one reason why financial support lags at both the State and Federal levels. It is characteristic of a lack of understanding and recognition behind the often heard question, 'Well, what has research done?'"

The research worker who makes a complete and factual report to his superior would be said to have done a good reporting job. If his boss sees fit to file it in the bottom drawer of his desk--not an unusual occurrence, I might add--the fact that the first man did a good reporting job has little meaning as far as the public is concerned. Neither the efficiency of the editorial staff nor the need on the part of potential consumers is ever brought to bear on hidden desk-drawer research results. This statement sounds so elemental, so obvious, that I wish to enlarge upon it a little.

A number of years ago we felt that the time had come to make some practical use of the great mass of soil survey data that had been accumulated at our agricultural colleges--for improving rural appraising. We worked out an outline of what we wanted and sallied forth to our agricultural colleges to get it. We found no difficulty in obtaining assent to the validity or desirability of our objectives, but when we asked for required data we found without exception that it either came from the recesses of the bottom drawer of the desk or some professor had to dig it out from a variety of data or create it for us from his own experience.

Now please do not infer from what I am saying that I think research workers should be expected to have printed bulletins ready and waiting for everyone who comes by and asks for certain information. What I am saying--and I am saying it from long personal experience--is that there is a great mass of top-grade research data so completely buried that it will never come to light unless some better way than now exists is found for bringing it to the surface. This then leads to my first point:

1. We must find better ways for bringing to light research data already in existence, as well as future data, and

2. Some authority beyond the researcher himself should have a voice in deciding what should and should not be written about progress and currently obtained results.

I am fully aware of the dynamite in that statement. I hear, "You will get this data only over my dead body." I know good research workers have a touch of prima donna in them. (I would not be so unkind as to say what one group said about themselves, and posted it on their laboratory walls, "You don't have to be crazy to work here, but it helps a lot.")

Seriously, let's throw out these hints for discussion:

1. Let the editorial department sit in on conferences called to consider research projects to be undertaken.

2. Have at such conferences one or more persons who would be most apt to use the results.

3. When the project is approved, let the editor have copies.

4. Set follow-up dates for checking on progress.

5. Have a board or some person who will settle questions of "to publish or not to publish."

6. When possible, have advance agreement on progress publication ahead of completion and final publication.

7. Plan safeguards for the researcher and the institution in any advanced publication.

You will note that all of this has to do with getting something to report. Certainly an editor will never do much good reporting if he has nothing to report. He must not only have access to facts, but he is, or at least should be, the best authority on what is newsworthy. Here he should have wide latitude within the area of truth, facts, and institutional policy.

Out of this, my first suggestion, I feel certain some constructive plans can come for improved ways and means of getting more better research data to report

To Whom Should Research Be Told?

When the research job is completed and there remains only the job of telling about it, we can break this function down in several ways. My first is by audience. I visualize three.

1. Other Researchers. I can dispose of this job by saying researchers have adequately told each other by both speed and print. To suggest more in this area would be but to whip the horse already in the lead.

2. Current and Potential Users. It would seem fair to say that here is the group for whom the whole job--both the research and the reporting--is undertaken. If we eliminate them, we might then well ask: Why have our experiment stations? Assuming the acceptance of this point, we next ask what we are trying to do to or for this customer of research--inform him or move him to action? Research shows us better ways; it warns of dangers and suggests counter measures.

These phrases suggest action--something to do. It would seem to me, then, that the answer to our question is that research and its telling must be pointed toward action. Another word for it is selling--making a sale. It is very seldom that a man buys who does not also use. I regret to say that as I review most past research, I find that telling about research has characteristically been reporting facts; in a few instances it has been interesting reading, but seldom--in fact, rarely--has it made a sale, as far as method of presentation is concerned.

There is a vast difference between telling about and describing the product, and telling what the product does. Just how much iron, wood, rubber and cotton can I sell you all wrapped up in one package that can be moved along a road on its own power? I can extoll the strength of steel, the cushioning effects of rubber, and the wearing qualities of cotton, and never create in you one desire to own pounds of these products. I can sell you--at least somebody has sold you--miles of pleasant, carefree riding, eye appeal in red paint and long, sleek, graceful lines, comfortable riding, and opportunity to go and come, see sights, catch fish, and visit friends, all wrapped up in one package called an auto.

We did a little research on buildings. We found a different way to build a barn. We tried to sell creosoted poles, metal roofs, and lumber. We could not find any one who wanted a creosoted pole that gummed up his clothes and burned his hands. We changed the approach and went to selling low-cost, labor-saving, preserved manure, healthier animals, increased production, and a plan that brought cows to the man instead of making him nursemaid to them. One of our licensees said to Mr. Perkins the other day, "If you want to know what worry is, have five times as many farmers demanding new buildings as you can supply."

I would suggest, then, as my second point consideration of ways and means for changing the reporting of research results to the customers of research from listing of facts, tabulation of figures, and bedtime tales to the technique of selling so that customers will buy and use.

Here is a hard assignment. I cannot think of any group on the campus of any agricultural college who will be for you. Facts are, almost all

will be against you. Don't you hear the arguments, "Not dignified " "Not our job to sell; ours to tell"? Industry sells; we simply get the facts. Where would hybrid corn be today if its sale promoters had been the researchers who discovered the facts? Our colleges are glad to proclaim its wide use, although they scorn the method that has made it possible.

3. The Bill Payers. The third audience is the entire population, less groups 1 and 2. They are big and they are important because they pick up the check--foot the bill. They are the forgotten man in the research picture. Being neglected and forgotten, they holler with increasing effectiveness about continuing to pay! They ask again and again, "What have you done with the money I have already given you?" They have said it so loud and often, federal and state legislators have heard them and are heeding what they say.

TO ME SOME PLAN FOR REACHING THE LAY PUBLIC WITH FACTUAL ANSWERS ON WHAT RESEARCH HAS DONE AND IS DOING IS A MUST IF AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH IS TO BE ADEQUATELY SUPPORTED WITH PUBLIC FUNDS.

It was in an effort to reach the laymen that I made the proposal appearing in the report of our study group that a brand or emblem be worked out that should be printed on products appearing in industry that were the result of federal and state research. This is easier to suggest than execute. It has its fair share of critics but also some distinct advantages.

Some of its advantages are:

1. It would be relatively low cost.
2. It would have wide distribution.
3. It would reach large segments of those who should be reached and who are difficult to reach in any other way.
4. When once set in motion, it would continue with little additional effort or cost.
5. It would answer the question most often asked, "What has agricultural research done?" by saying it has given this package of penicillin, this can of frozen orange juice, this hybrid seed, this safe bottle of milk.

There must be more than stamping emblems on packages if we are to tell adequately the results of research to the uninformed, generally disinterested lay man and woman. As a starting point I would refer to the work of Messrs. DeKruif and J. D. Ratcliff and note what and how they have told the public the medical story. Surely there must be as many fascinating stories in all agricultural research as there are in medical research. Think for a moment on the new foods and new forms of food that research has given us. Current stories on antibiotics, trace minerals, vitamins, bug killers and hosts of similar items contain glamor and wait only the pen of the popular writer.

For my third point, then, I would suggest the careful study of some positive plans for identifying the products of agricultural research, and for writing of these attainments so as to appeal to the man who knows nothing of, and cares little for, the technicalities, but who nevertheless pays the bill. It is in this area that we find what I call the life and death aspects of agricultural research. The Pace Committee was created to try

and determine why adequate appropriations could not be obtained for research. One of the answers of the study group was inadequately telling the public the results of research.

The Tools for Telling

We tell of research by means of the printed page, by speaking, and by demonstration. (I am attempting no technical breakdown of teaching and being taught.)

Our most effective, and certainly most extensive, means for telling has been by the use of the printed word. I have made suggestions for directing these words more effectively toward those who should be reached; but in terms of emphasis and proportion of use, the printed page probably stands at the top. No doubt there is still room for improvement, as there always will be. Of the three means for telling the research story, I would say this one demands, at the moment, the least additional effort. I did not say no additional effort.

I am not familiar with the degree of responsibility that agricultural editors have for the talks that are made concerning research. If, as a rule, they have no authority, I would like to suggest that here is a field into which their abilities can well be projected.

One of the greatest contrasts between commercial organizations and colleges of agriculture is the manner in which they use their personnel in telling their story orally to the public. Most commercial organizations select carefully and then train the men who are to speak for and about them. Their talks are reviewed, modified, and improved until they present the story to be told with maximum effectiveness. Many times I have spent days and hours in getting to and attending conferences at our colleges only to hear--or should I say try to hear?--speakers who whisper, turn their heads away from the audience, use involved, hard-to-understand words, phrases, and sentences. As speakers they would stand at the bottom of the class of any group who gave concern to public speaking. Others who speak well are unable to marshall their facts and present the meat of the subject under discussion.

Is there any reason why the editorial department of a college, perhaps in cooperation with other departments, could not at least offer to help and criticize those persons on the faculty who most often speak for, and of, the work of the college?

With increasing use of radio to tell by voice of the work of our colleges the importance of not only correct but effective speaking by those who speak for our colleges is of growing importance. I am convinced that radio would use many times the amount of material now furnished them if it was timely and effectively prepared for wide distribution. Here is an outlet for telling the story of research that has been slightly scratched. The first step and the basic need is top-grade editing. The second is wide distribution.

To point up this phase of my paper, and give you something for further consideration, I throw out this suggestion:

Through this association and in cooperation with other agencies that may be interested, create a central news distributing center. Place one top-grade editor-public relations man in charge. Every college, the United

States Department of Agriculture, farmer organizations would then feed into this central office top-grade agricultural research facts, findings, and news. It would be the function of this agency to feed wide publicity through every legitimate channel. Of course, proper credit would be given to individuals and institutions for their contributions.

As this idea is put into workable form, I am inclined to believe it should handle the top-grade releases, worthy of national distribution, over major networks and by carefully selected speakers. Local matters would, of course, continue to be handled locally.

The third tool for distributing research findings is that which appeals to the eye--television and demonstrations.

Some work has been done in demonstrating with charts, models, and live animals certain of our research work. So-called demonstration plots, fields, and farms are now used effectively. Much remains to be done. Here again we need team work between those who create and those who disseminate. Perhaps this means of "telling" will be slow, for it has limited application and is often expensive. It deserves constant study, and out of that will come new ways and means.

Television has unlimited opportunity for dramatization. The story of penicillin, rubber from weeds, new varieties of fruits and crops, and hosts of other research finds have behind them stories of wide public appeal. Most of them include success, failure, success, failure, and, of course, final success. These are the elements of drama. Here is a new, highly effective tool we must not overlook.

I recall a demonstration of the practical use of research by a team of 4-H youngsters that will always remain in my memory. These little fellows--they must have been near the minimum age for membership--put on a hog sanitation demonstration using hog house and equipment models as well as miniature hogs. They held their audience better than any of the speakers who preceded or followed them. Their little act would have been a top-grade telecast.

In Conclusion

You may say that I have let my remarks wander beyond the sphere of the agricultural editor of an agricultural college. You may be correct. I have done so deliberately to lead up to this question:

Is it the job of the college editor to tell all the story in all its ways, or is it his function to do no more than edit bulletins?

This is a big and important question. It was the giving of the wrong answer to a similar question that all but wrecked our railroads. When they had to decide whether they were transportation systems or just operators of trains, they said trains. To others--now the competitors who have all but put them out of business--went the job of trucking, piping, and flying.

I am not assuming to answer this whole question for you. I will answer part of it thus: If your only job is to edit manuscripts and look after the details of printing bulletins, you are not going to do much better in telling the story of research than you are now doing.

For the sake of research I hope you are now, or may soon become, more, much more than proof readers.